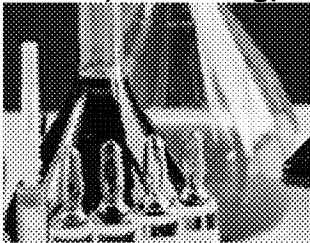


UMass drug-testing lab at Amherst scheduled to close

Published: Thursday, August 18, 2011, 3:45 PM Updated: Thursday, August 18, 2011, 4:14 PM



By **Dan Ring, The Republican** The Republican



BOSTON -The administration of **Gov. Deval L. Patrick** is confirming that it will close a state-run, drug-testing laboratory in Amherst at the end of next month because of budget problems.

The lab, a longtime fixture at the **University of Massachusetts at Amherst**, is the only lab in Western Massachusetts for weighing and testing illegal drugs seized by local police departments.

"Due to an unprecedented fiscal situation we have had to make extremely difficult decisions and at this time we plan to consolidate our resources and close the Amherst Drug Lab," said Jennifer Manley, communications director for the **state Department of Public Health**, in a statement.

The statement said the public health department will save \$192,000 in salaries this fiscal year with a closing date of Sept. 30. The total savings for this fiscal year would be \$227,000, the statement said.

According to Manley, four employees **at the lab** will be laid off, but under union rules, they may have the opportunity to bump other employees depending on their position and seniority.

The planned closure of the lab comes after the Patrick administration shuttered a popular **branch of the Registry of Motor Vehicles at the Eastfield Mall in Springfield** in 2009 as part of a plan that shut down 11 Registry branches across the state to cut costs during a fiscal crisis in state government. Officials of the state's Trial Court are also planning to close **Westfield District Court** and move its employees and operations to other nearby district courts as part of a move to close a dozen courthouses across the state to save money.

The lab, which employs three chemists and a supervisor, analyzed 4,629 samples of illegal drugs for municipal police departments in Western Massachusetts, plus an additional 1,527 samples that came from the main state lab in Boston, during the most recent fiscal year, according to the Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists, the union that represents employees of the lab.

Joseph Dorant, president of the **Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists**, said he met with public health officials on Wednesday afternoon and they told him of the planned closure of the lab by Sept. 30. Dorant said the planned closure doesn't make sense.

"The impact on public safety in the western part of the state is going to be devastating," Dorant said.

Police in Western Massachusetts may need to transport seized drugs to the public health lab in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston, Dorant said.

The closure of the Amherst lab will increase the current 90-day backlog at the Jamaica Plain lab and require local police to spend more time on the road, Dorant said. It could also take longer to test illegal drugs from Western Massachusetts, he said.

Springfield police currently transport drugs to the lab once a week and Holyoke police, once every three weeks, he said.

More details coming in The Republican.

© 2011 masslive.com. All rights reserved.